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ABSTRACT

A review of literature in sociolinguistics and classroom conversation reveals areas in which sociolinguistic research and theory can inform the conducting of student writing conferences with teachers. Studies on classroom discourse, communicative competence in classroom exchanges, the nature and role of teacher talk, and the features of communication in writing conferences are explored. It is concluded that the writing conference is a private dyad within a larger speech community, made up of teacher and student sharing, and is a natural, necessary, and productive supplement to classroom teaching. It can be a nurturing, productive, confidence-building, and even fun experience if treated as an open-ended communicative event in which the teacher asks questions, waits patiently for answers, provides verbal nudges, and probes rather than tests the student. More classroom research is needed, ideally initiated by teacher-ethnographers. (Contains 33 references.) (MSE)

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Telling Teacher Talk: Sociolinguistic Features of Writing Conferences

Abstract

Many writing instructors and language arts teachers have incorporated writing conferences into the classroom feedback structure. These conferences could be examined from a new perspective by looking at what teachers do, and by critiquing how teachers talk about writing in the conference. Current findings in sociolinguistics could inform our classroom practices and increase our awareness and understanding of the impact of teacher talk.

Background and Rationale

Although sociolinguistics may be considered a relatively young field within the area of linguistics and language study, wise moves were made early on. Researchers recognized the value of schools and classrooms as rich sites for collecting language samples. The varied activities in schools also contributed to the widening interests of sociolinguists in terms of psychology and anthropology. At a time when these several social science-based research approaches were converging to broaden and strengthen the field of sociolinguistics, schools and classrooms provided ideal living laboratories, places where language interactions could be viewed in context (Florio-Ruane, 1987). Penalosa (1981) defines this approach as the "systematic description of communicative behavior as culturally standardized . . . viewed in the sociocultural context in which it occurs" (p. 68).

The basic theory of inquiry for sociolinguistic work is grounded in evaluating interaction, as described by Gumperz (1982):

> Sociolinguistic paradigms . . . isolate particular features of language use and seek to demonstrate that these a) correlate with extralinguistically determined categories such as sex, age, social status or discourse context and b) are in some sense stigmatized or pejoratively evaluated when they continue to be employed. Such sociolinguistic factors affect individuals' ability to be heard and be listened to in public life. (p.27)

Sociolinguists have found a multitude of study foci available in the classroom; almost all dimensions of human behavior, language use, and interaction are dynamically replicated there, as evidenced in studies of language variations, language and access issues, language and gender issues, second-language learning, African-American Venacular English or Ebonics and dialectal differences, language attitude, and of course, classroom discourse.

One key relationship, the one between the developmental writing classroom and the current sociolinguistic research, can certainly afford to be strengthened by an astute awareness of sociolinguistic features as they appear in classrooms. Even with a significant increase in the number of classroom ethnographies which employ discourse analysis or look at language usage and communicative structures, are teachers possibly continuing to work in ways that may not be promoting student's growth in language use? Perhaps recognizing sociolinguistic features can bring about real change in teachers who take the time to understand the implications of how

we talk with student writers. I believe sociolinguistics can tell us about ourselves as teachers of developmental writing, and specifically about what we do in writing conferences.

Our academically underprepared students in developmental courses are especially impacted by the hierarchical shape that most school interactions take. We can not deny that several landmark sociolinguistic investigations have already exposed our "power" positions as teachers, and how our relationships with students' language and our arrogations regarding their home culture can impede learning. Black (1993) has recognized that most composition theorists and teachers have assumed that a strong movement toward face-to-face conferencing held the promise of unproblematic equality, yet, she found that "power relations play a significant role in the structure of the conference and that larger social social structures [class, language difference, race, gender] which disadvantage particular groups of people are reconstructed and reinforced in the structure of the conference." (pp.2557)

Sociolinguistic Research in Classrooms

When sociolinguists examine the language of classrooms, they attempt to design a framework in which to describe various language use events. First, the school itself is generally agreed to be considered a speech community (Hymes, 1974) and, according to Gumperz (1982), "the speech community must form the starting point of linguistic analysis . . . [and is] defined as a system of organized diversity held together by common norms and aspirations" (p. 24). If the whole scope of school language use constitutes a speech community, speech events then are embedded in each teacher and student meeting. According to Kutz and Roskelly, (1991), "the typical class can be seen as a speech event, a large unit of discourse . . . a genre of speech activity [with] its own structure and roles and rules (both spoken and unspoken)" (p. 73).

We know that the speech community is one replete with "not only rules, but also sometimes oppression, sometimes freedom, in the relation between personal abilities and their occasions of use" (Hymes, 1974, p. 205). Working within any speech community then implies that problematical events and issues are inherent in language use. Hymes confirms this by recognizing the classroom speech "community as an organization of diversity" (Cazden, 1992, p. 198). Bakhtin takes this even further, stating that the school/classroom speech community exhibits "more conflict than coexistence" (qtd. in Cazden p. 198).

Next, the focus of sociolinguistic research is on its particular communicative device, discourse; discourse can be evaluated for effectiveness in developing *communicative competence*. This term describes not only a speaker or student's demonstration of acquired language and language code, stemming from a linguistic competence, but is directly related to speaker or student's success in the negotiation of cultural contexts (Saville-Troike, 1984). In other words, what many of us sense is a tacit knowledge of appropriate language use and appropriate languaging behaviors in social settings is truly an acquired repertoire of skills that has the power to "mark" speakers and students. And, because "[p]roblems arise when individual competence is judged in relation to a presumed ideal speech community . . . unequal or inappropriate educational treatment" could result (Saville-Troike, p. 27). Providing students with a variety of language use experiences fosters and broadens communicative competence. It is, therefore, imperative for teachers of developmental writing to understand the value inherent in dialogic opportunities such as writing conferences in order to utilize the communicative competence- building qualities of these conferences.

Since classroom discourse can take on many forms, several types of analyses have been employed to look at the range of classroom exchanges. Fasold(1990) explains that "discourse studies on interactive events concern problems and successes people have using language in their interactions . . . [in other words, how they] . . . manage their discourse with respect to their cultural backgrounds and their interactive goals at the time of talk" (p. 65). Discourse analysis is a "linguistic analysis of naturally occurring connected spoken or written

discourse . . . i.e. conversational exchanges and written texts" (Stubbs, 1983, p. 81). Bo conversational exchanges and written texts, requisite parts of the writing conference, have be examined by sociolinguists through discourse analysis.

We know from our own schooling and our own teaching practices that teacher-t is a fundamental component of classrooms, with some studies claiming three of five hours da are filled with "chalk talk" (Krogness, 1995). The overt function of teacher-talk is to moni and control through several forms of metacommunication, what Stubbs (1983) describes as t about what teacher just said, and includes attracting students' attention, controlling th amount of speech, confirming understanding, repeating directions, and correcting. T metacommunication often dominates classrooms, leaving little time for more productive soc cognitive activity; one estimate claims that for 70% of all classroom time someone is talki and for 70% of this talking time, teacher is talking (Stubbs). Furthermore, "most teacher-t can be described as 'telling'" (Edwards & Furlong, 1978, p. 23). Research specifically teacher-student discourse with respect to level and success of interaction has revealed t "most often teacher's own talk is intended to control interjection and behavior rather than communicate directly about a subject" (Kutz & Roskelly, 1991, p. 73). Critical then to creati more opportunities for students to engage in literacy activities is the need for m metalanguage: talk about language, i.e. conversation about reading and writing. Stubbs (19 and others have recognized that the constructs of classrooms, although social in nature, "asymmetrical." In other words, students and teachers are complicit in their tacit knowled of what teacher-talk does and, more pointedly, who "does" teacher-talk: students don't "d teacher-talk. An imbalance of power undergirds all classroom activity.

What we know about socially constructed knowledge tells us that the signals s through such hierarchical relationships can impede learning. Fairclough (1989) recognizes t any "unequal" discourse event "exercises controls and constraints on non-powerful participan (p. 46). This is compounded when we understand that as language is acquired within social structure, (schools in this case), learners simultaneously "internalize social reali (Penalosa, 1981, p. 42). If students then learn not to trust their talk, what happens in dy such as writing conferences is impacted by the limitations we have placed on studen opportunities for learning through talk. If we suddenly ask students to perform in writ conferences in ways that contradict the typical classroom discourse rules and roles, can expect productive conferences? And, if there are some positive features of teacher-talk, students assimilated these features, would this enhance their abilities to guide their o learning? Could appropriation of the language of monitoring and control contribute to stud empowerment and be carried successfully into the writing conference setting? As John Goldstein point out, we "develop and test our ideas about meaning and form chiefly throu verbal interaction with more verbally mature speakers" (qtd. in Gere, 1987, p. 82). It is sense that the pervasive teacher-dominated scenario could afford to shift somewhat, that atypical could occur, when writing conferences begin, student-talk could begin.

In a transactional model of teaching, in contrast to a transmission model of teachi goals for cognitive development rest on assumptions of assimilated learning. Levinson others strongly urge that we recognize the developmental power of conversation, "the form language that everyone is first exposed to and hence the 'matrix' for language acquisition" (q in Sperling, 1992, p. 3). Vygotsky (1978) asserts that "[t]he transformation of an interperso process to an intrapersonal one is the result of a long series of developmental events" (p. 5 Educators and parents recognize that this movement *outward*, this prosocial behavior, signif growth. Of the many social activities necessary to trigger this movement, the foremost productive talk. "To approach knowing through dialogue is to acknowledge that mak meaning is a transactional process" (Peterson, 1992, p. 110).

This is where the sociolinguist comes in Gumperz (1982) explains that "to underst the role of language in education . . . we need to begin with a closer understanding of h

linguistic signs interact with social knowledge in discourse" (p. 29). Therefore, the intent of sociolinguists is not simply to appraise how language may serve curricular goals in the reified activity of classrooms, but to see in which ways "speech unites the cognitive and the social" (Barnes, qtd. in Cazden, 1988, p. 2). Sociolinguists attempt to uncover the patterns that run beneath our teacher-talk and their findings help to move us toward using language and inviting language that promotes discovery and growth.

Sociolinguists have examined the verbal interactions between individuals and have been able to map out distinguishable features of this interaction. Cazden (1988) defines a speech event as a verbal interaction that is "recurring, bounded, with a clear beginning and end, [and] with consistent rules for participation" (p. 8). Conversation has been variously defined by sociolinguists, but Trudgill (1983) recognizes that the features are "structured, rule-governed, non-random sequences of utterances" (p. 128). Are writing conferences speech events, conversations, both, neither?

Composition theorists and researchers define a writing conference as a teacher-student dyad designed to facilitate learning; they consider the focus on and the primacy of "talk," "dialogue" or "conversation" within such encounters to be its distinguishing feature from any other mode of instruction (Flynn, 1993, p. 10). The three terms, *talk*, *dialogue* and *conversation*, are here used interchangeably and always represent the key element of the conference.

Implications Based on Research

If we acknowledge that patterns of interaction exist in classrooms and if we also acknowledge that some aspects of these patterns can be problematical, working at cross-purposes to the goals of socially- constructed learning, then we need to look closely at the features found in writing conferences. We may find that some features, carried over from classroom discourse, will not be productive. And we may find that some strategies can contribute greatly to the writing conference dynamic and ultimately to communicative competence.

Cazden (1992), Hymes (1974), and others have sketched out the typical patterns of classroom discourse in sociolinguistic terms. The most prominent pattern found in classrooms, identified by Cazden and others, is configured by a Teacher Initiation (I), a Student Response (R), and a Teacher Evaluation (E). This IRE pattern, or act sequence, as Hymes calls it, is recapitulated in writing conferences, with varying degrees of intent and formal structure.

A key component of the IRE pattern is the teacher-initiate question. And, unfortunately, "[t]eachers most commonly ask questions to test knowledge rather than to gain information on the ostensible topic" (Saville-Troike, 1984, p. 242). If this pattern is prevalent in classrooms, students have no reason to believe that even those questions posed during writing conferences have any other purpose but to test. Most of us might be working under the assumption that our questioning strategies, via the Socratic method, lead to the most productive discourse with students. But again, as both Fletcher (1993) and Saville-Troike(1984) remind us, too many questions (number), or questions too removed from what the student deems meaningful (type), can move students to passivity, immobilizing rather than stimulating them. When a teacher or a tutor loses sight of student-defined goals, a "disparity between [teacher] ideals and [teacher] practice . . . " occurs (Fletcher, p. 42). Johnson (1993) identified three aspects of conference questioning as problematic: "First, the person asking the questions controls the direction of the inquiry; . . . second, questions imposed by a teacher may derail student's train of thought . . . . Finally, most teachers do not give students as much time as they need to respond fully to questions" (p. 34). It seems even well-intentioned questioning could have a detrimental effect.

Studies of wait-time, the period of time between teacher's question and student's response, tell us that a strong correlation exists between an extended length of wait-tim the quality of the writing conference. Johnson (1993) cites a report by Rowe (1973) concluded that when teachers consciously allowed more wait-time several positive e followed.

> [T]he length of response increased; unsolicited but appropriate responses incre the failure to respond decreased; confidence, as reflected in response, incre speculative responses increased; evidence inferences increased; student que increased; and responses from students rated as slow increased. (p. 38)

Often we engage in a "no-gap overlap" sequence as speakers who are uncomfo with silences ourselves, forgetting that students from various cultures or those with mainstream experiences measure and demonstrate learning in different ways.

The Bellack system, developed in 1966, looks at pedagogical "moves," and desc yet another classroom discourse pattern. MacDonald, (1982) describes these "move structuring, soliciting, responding and reacting. In studies which followed the "moves" – like a chess game is recorded – teachers made the most structuring moves, usually by initi topics. Teachers did not, surprisingly, ask the most questions, which are solicitation m Students responded more when asked direct questions, which seems highly likely, bu category of reacting, defined as "comments the speaker makes unsolicitedly," was almost e distributed (MacDonald, p. 8). One explanation was offered: "It is not uncommon for a te to comment on a student's response to a question, whereas it is less likely that students v comment on the remarks of a teacher" (p. 12). This could imply that more dynamic exch occurred when both students and teacher "shared responsibility for participation" and whe student side of participation was more "self-initiated than teacher solicited" (p. 12). W here too that when students are encouraged to discuss, they generally follow implicit ru classroom discourse: students don't do teacher talk.

In a study that focused on the perceptions of students regarding their teacher's v responses, positive feedback was the feature most connected with high teacher ratings (Mo Dershimer et al., 1980). Highly rated teachers engaged most in a cyclical, repetitive feed loop (a say-back style of reiterating and valuing all student responses), did not overuse p and maintained a "conversational style" even during regular classroom discourse (p. 83). researchers also found that a natural and productive questioning cycle developed as a res this technique. The important implication stemming from the data revealed that "an interr relationship exists among [students'] status in the social setting, [students'] participati social discourse in that setting, and the [students'] interpretation of the meaning of that s discourse" (Morine-Dershimer,et al . p. 95). Clearly we need to be aware of how our tea talk is perceived and evaluated by students.

Because teacher dominance in the classroom can be measured by observing how of the communicative "work" is being done by them, some sociolinguists have focuse observing who does the communicative "work" in writing conferences (Edwards & Fur 1978, p. 18). Freedman (1982) looked at the writing conferences of both "strong" and "w writers to determine which teacher-initiated activity was most productive. The ling analysis tool she developed centered on measuring "idea units" that revealed semantic co In this way, she traced the course of the conference and identified areas of verbal focu contributed to conference success. Her findings suggest that when topics were co-devel by both teacher and student, and when the student was offered more opportunities to deter topic focus or initiate topic shift, the conference outcomes carried more weight in ter productive revision (Freedman, p. 6). She also acknowledged that praise and feedback positive impacts, but that weaker writers received less of each; she determined that conferences typically focused on lower-order writing concerns (usage and mechanics is

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and that both student and teacher were complicit in this focus. Interestingly, the stronger writers found conferences more productive when their behavior matched the expectations of the teacher (p. 10). Teachers admitted that the weaker writers' semantic content and focus on errors was off-putting, leading to a facile transfer of typical classroom discourse behaviors and attitudes to the writing conference setting.

The results imply that teacher attitudes toward a student's languaging behaviors can impede student gains in communicative competence. The weaker students, both native and non-native speakers, were not "teacher-wise . . . they did not ingratiate themselves with the teacher (Freedman, 1982, p. 10). Teacher attitudes are "endemic and powerful . . . and regardless of overtly expressed attitudes, teachers are quite likely to be influenced by what they perceive as deviant speech . . . thus potentially inhibiting the students' desire to learn" (Gumperz & Hernandez-Chavez, 1982, p. 28). It seems these students were denied an opportunity to develop or exhibit their own communicative competence, which, as Cazden (1988) points out, "is demonstrated implicitly by . . . appropriate responses and initiations . . . and supported by sanctions within the social context" (p. 47). I fear we seriously underestimate the language skills students bring to the classroom and fail to "start from where they are."

Sperling (1992) has done extensive studies of writing conferences in an attempt to highlight how "talk 'rearranges' problems" (p. 3). She has analyzed these sessions using a matrix of adjacency pairs, such as pairs of questions-answers, offers-accepts, and requests-compliances (p. 10). Tagging these pairs as they are used in conferences uncovers the patterns of conferences: these patterns of interaction reflect who is doing what during the conference. "The 'steerer', not surprisingly, is invariably the teacher" (p. 10). But Sperling synthesizes her findings with other research of her own and others to posit that teacher-talk was not necessarily the only culprit in diminishing the conference goals. Indeed, Sperling found that effective 'steering' was a cooperative labor, one that was dependent on student input. Successful conferences were "highly collaborative . . . negotiations between teacher and student . . . ideas and strategies for writing [were] reflected in mutual control of both conference topic and structure (Sperling, 1990, p. 39). The unproductive conference was signified by student passivity and limited student contributions, and consequently, teachers took the reins (p. 39). Her key finding, that a "multiplicity of dyadic opportunities . . . [in classrooms] . . . feeds the collaborative effort . . . " makes a strong case for building in more occasions for student-talk (Sperling, p. 39).

The findings of Walker and Elias (1987) confirm that when teachers spent much of their time explaining, *explaining* being a major component of teacher-talk, the conference was less successful. Their work suggests that "conferences devoted to the articulation of criteria for success in writing and to evaluation of the students' work" rated much more highly (Walker & Elias, 1987, p. 266). In other words, students who talked with teachers about what they needed to change or improve, and students who engaged with teachers in self-evaluation, were much more likely to revise and improve writing. "The dialogic nature of the conference allows students to express their own concerns and thereby participate more actively in the evaluation . . . [and] develop their meta-awareness of language as a generative system for thinking and formulating knowledge" (Walker & Elias, 1987, p. 167). Asking students to build the criteria or agenda for the conference, and inviting their participation in self-evaluation, may be the most important components to successful conferencing. In order for these operatives to work, teacher-talk must be re-evaluated.

Newkirk recognizes that ideally a writing conference "shifts conversational and evaluative responsibility onto the student," and he echoes Sperling's (1990) findings that credit "negotiation and mutual manipulation" (Newkirk, 1995, p. 195). In a collaborative conference then, student ownership of the text should extend to student ownership of the conference. (Of course, Newkirk and others have found this economic model a limiting and potentially over-

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approach, rather than expanding the *ownership*, *authority*, or *banking* metaphors any furthe

What is problematic, according to Newkirk (1995), is the language of the conferen itself. He found that students were handed the ball, but not the terminology needed to ma the best of their "performance." Because students are rarely offered what Goffman calls environment of mutual monitoring possibilities" they cannot surmount the obstacles that th new performative tasks entail (cited in Gumperz, 1982, p. 48). Prior to the conferen teachers held the ball, they set the agenda, they did the evaluating. Again, the IRE pattern the fall-back position for students illequipped to advance their own conference goals becau they are locked into patterns they have understood tacitly as culturally appropriate behav (Newkirk, p. 212). Newkirk does not recommend that we teach students overtly the types language strategies that would help them gain access; however, he believes teachers can initi role-shifting by modelling and proceed with much more patience regarding the hesitation students to participate fully. The temptation to fill silences with teacher-talk must be resist

According to King (1993), "writing conferences which simply reproduce interpersonal relationships of conventional schooling intensify teacher-centeredness, magnify the teacher's authority and more powerfully denying the student any access to control" (p. For writing conferences to be productive, teachers must give up some power in the discour although they certainly remain the power behind the discourse. Fairclough (1989), in *Langua and Power*, reminds us that even these kinds of face-to-face encounters are invariably unequ The nature of teaching itself is "characterized by a division of roles, such as one actor [teacher] . . . assumes and is accorded authority to guide the action" (Gumperz & Herasimch 1975, p. 87). Working from the assumption that this imbalance may never be elimina completely, we should attempt to tease out the strategies of teacher-talk that can ben students and help drive the writing conference where the student wants it to go. "How m students talk is not a key determinant of successful writing conferences"; what they talk abo the agenda–is, "especially when the focus remains on the student's work and not the teach agenda" (Walker & Elias, 1987, p. 281). True teaching events or teachable moments can occur, even if teacher has surrendered some comfort and complacency with power.

King (1993) is also keen to remind us that the conference implies a new "unaccustomed role" for both teacher and student (p. 17). This becomes problematical w we fail to orient students to the role by denying them the language tools needed to negotiate conference. We often withhold the tools if we do too much telling or even too much ask Gaining an awareness of our teacher-talk strategies and making a shift is "a difficult prob for those of us who have been trained to exert authority by assuming ownership of the stude text" (Fletcher, 1993, p. 41).

One approach that is being re-developed to specifically contribute to wri conference strategies is the counselor-client style of interaction. In this Rogerian mo effective components of counseling relationships are transferred to writing conference setti The elements of trust-building, client empowerment or enabling, and non-didactic mean guidance are key to both conferencing and counseling (Taylor, 1993, p. 26). This "he relationship" can increase student confidence when teachers understand that quality liste is productive and therapeutic (p. 30).

Bakhtin asserted that "idea systems exist as a relation between speaker and liste (qtd. in Gere, 1987, p. 87). The idea system of the writing conference relies on relationship. But this relationship is by no means free of interferences or conflict from e direction, as Bakhtin states:

> Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the pr property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated- overpopulated-with intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intent and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (qtd. in Cazden, 1992, p. 1

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What we need to explore, based on the studies described above, is how re-defining our teaching and learning roles within conferences can enhance conference dialogue and contribute to student growth through communicative competence.

Conclusion

I am not certain how good a judge I can be of my own conferencing strategies, but I have observed how both tutors and teachers have rushed to fill gaps, dominated conferences with teacher-talk, and "steered" conferences to meet goals that were not negotiated or shared by the student. I believe the strength and value of conferencing still comes from asking questions (although I am gaining new understandings of this strategy), waiting patiently for answers, inserting verbal nudges, and probing rather than testing. The flavor of these conferences may seem more open-ended than some described by sociolinguists as speech events, events which are more bounded and clearly start and finish.

I see the participants in speech events or conversations engaged in what Oakesholt (1959) calls an "unrehearsed intellectual adventure" (qtd. in Peterson, 1992, p. 50). This simple definition happens to neatly address the most integral components of the writing conference. There is a sense of unrehearsed spontaneity, even if the conference is scheduled; there are unstated goals of intellectual stimulation, learning, and "showing the knowing;" and there is often no way to predict outcomes or provide closure.

The writing conference- a private dyad within a larger speech community, made up of teacher and student sharing- is a special, natural, necessary and productive supplement to classroom teaching. Graves (1983) states that "conferences have a cumulative effect on the writer" (p. 142), one that can be nurturing, productive, confidence-building and even fun. Unfortunately, "the writing conference is not accepted as a central part of the curriculum for most teachers" (Barker, qtd. in Flynn & King, 1993, p. 4). I believe that some of the tangential benefits of conferencing have not yet been effectively transmitted to teachers through composition specialists or sociolinguists. Certainly there is the need for more classroom research, ideally initiated by teacher-ethnographers; "If sociolinguists are right, we cannot fully understand classroom language without understanding the ways it is perceived by the classroom participants, for it is these perceptions that guide their behavior" (Morine-Dershimer, 1980, p. 101). Discerning the sociolinguistic features of conferences, through ethnographic strategies that invite students to become co-researchers, can contribute to communicative competence, strengthen student confidence, prompt socio-cognitive shifts in learning strategies, contribute to a socially-constructed learning environment, and place more value on oral sharing and oral forms of evaluation.

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